

Why Africana History?

By John Henrik Clarke (January 1987)

Africa and its people are the most written about and the least understood of all of the world's people. This condition started in the 15th and the 16th centuries with the beginning of the slave trade and the colonialism system. The Europeans not only colonialized most of the world, they began to colonialize information about the world and its people. In order to do this, they had to forget, or pretend to forget, all they had previously known about the Africans. They were not meeting them for the first time; there had been another meeting during Greek and Roman times. At that time they complemented each other.

The African, Clitus Niger, King of Bactria, was also a Cavalry Commander for Alexander the Great. Most of the Greeks' thinking was influenced by this contact with the Africans. The people and the cultures of what is known as Africa are older than the word "Africa." According to most records, old and new, Africans are the oldest people on the face of the earth. The people now called Africans not only influenced the Greeks and the Romans, they influenced the early world before there was a place called Europe.

When the early Europeans first met Africans, at the crossroads of history, it was a respectful meeting and the Africans were not slaves. Their nations were old before Europe was born. In this period of history, what was to be later known as "Africa" was an unknown place to the people who would someday be called, "Europeans." Only the people of some of the Mediterranean Islands and a few states of what would become the Greek and Roman states knew of parts of North Africa, and that was a land of mystery. After the rise and decline of Greek civilization and the Roman destruction of the City of Carthage, they made the conquered territories into a province which they called Africa, a word derived from "afri," and the name of a group of people about whom little is known. At first the word applied only to the Roman colonies in North Africa. There was a time when all dark-skinned people were called Ethiopians, for the Greeks referred to Africa as, "The Land of the Burnt-Face People."

If Africa, in general, is a man-made mystery, Egypt, in particular, is a bigger one. There has long been an attempt on the part of some European "scholars" to deny that Egypt was a part of Africa. To do this they had to ignore the great masterpieces on Egyptian history written by European writers such as, *Ancient Egypt, Light of the World, Vols. I & II*, and a whole school of European thought that placed Egypt in proper focus in relationship to the rest of Africa.

The distorters of African history also had to ignore the fact that the people of the ancient land which would later be called Egypt, never called their country by that name. It was called, TA-MERRY or KAMPT and sometimes KEMET or SAIS. The ancient Hebrews called it MIZRAIN. Later the Moslem Arabs used the same term but later discarded it. Both the Greeks and the Romans referred to the country as the "Pearl of the Nile." The Greeks gave it the simple name AEGYPTCUS. Thus the word we know as Egypt is of Greek origin.

Until recent times most Western scholars have been reluctant to call attention to the fact that the Nile River is 4,000 miles long. It starts in the south, in the heart of Africa, and flows to the north. It was the world's first cultural highway. Thus, Egypt was a composite of many African cultures. In his article, "The Lost Pharaohs of Nubia," Professor Bruce Williams infers that the nations in the South could be older than Egypt. This information is not new. When rebel European scholars were saying this 100 years ago, and proving it, they were not taken seriously.

It is unfortunate that so much of the history of Africa has been written by conquerors, foreigners, missionaries and adventures. The Egyptians left the best record of their history written by local writers. It was not until near the end of the 19th century when a few European scholars learned to decipher their writing that this was understood.

The Greek traveler, Herodotus, was in Africa about 450 B.C. His eyewitness account is still a revelation. He

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witnessed African civilization in decline and partly in ruins, after many invasions. However, he could still see the indications of the greatness that it had been. In this period in history, the Nile Valley civilization of Africa had already brought forth two "Golden Ages" of achievement and had left its mark for all the world to see.

Slavery and colonialism strained, but did not completely break, the cultural umbilical cord between the Africans in Africa and those who, by forced migration, now live in what is called the Western World. A small group of African American and Caribbean writers, teachers and preachers, collectively developed the basis of what would be an African-consciousness movement over 100 years ago. Their concern was with Africa, in general, Egypt and Ethiopia, and what we now call the Nile Valley.

In approaching this subject, I have given preference to writers of African descent who are generally neglected. I maintain that the African is the final authority on Africa. In this regard I have reconsidered the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, George Washington Williams, Drussila Dungee Houston, Carter G. Woodson, Willis N. Huggins, and his most outstanding living student, John G. Jackson (now deceased; editor). I have also reread the manuscripts of some of the unpublished books of Charles C. Seifert, especially manuscripts of his last completed book, *Who Are the Ethiopians?* Among Caribbean scholars, like Charles C. Seifert, J.A. Rogers (from Jamaica) is the best known and the most prolific. Over 50 years of his life was devoted to documenting the role of African personalities in world history. His two-volume work, *World's Great Men of Color*, is a pioneer work in the field.

Among the present-day scholars writing about African history, culture, and politics, Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannan's books are the most challenging. I have drawn heavily on his research in the preparation of this article. He belongs to the main cultural branch of the African world, having been born in Ethiopia, growing to early manhood in the Caribbean Islands and having lived in the African American community of the United States for over 20 years. His major books on African history are: *Black Man of the Nile*, 1979, *Africa: Mother of Western Civilization*, 1976 and *The African Origins of Major Western Religions*, 1970.

Our own great historian, W.E.B. DuBois tells us, "Always Africa is giving us something new ♦ On its black bosom arose one of the earliest, if not the earliest, of self-protecting civilizations, and grew so mightily that it still furnishes superlatives to thinking and speaking men. Out of its darker and more remote forest vastness came, if we may credit many recent scientists, the first welding of iron, and we know that agriculture and trade flourished there when Europe was a wilderness.

Dr. DuBois tells us further that, "Nearly every human empire that has arisen in the world, material and spiritual, has found some of its greatest crises on this continent of Africa. It was through Africa that Christianity became the religion of the world ♦ It was through Africa that Islam came to play its great role of conqueror and civilizer."

Egypt and the nations of the Nile Valley were, figuratively, the beating heart of Africa and the incubator for its greatness for more than a thousand years. Egypt gave birth to what later would become known as "Western Civilization," long before the greatness of Greece and Rome.

This is a part of the African story, and in the distance it is a part of the African American story. It is difficult for depressed African Americans to know that they are a part of the larger story of the history of the world. The history of the modern world was made, in the main, by what was taken from African people. Europeans emerged from what they call their "middle-Ages," people poor, land poor and resources poor. They raided and raped the cultures of the world, mostly Africa, and filled their homes and museums with treasures, then they called the people primitive. The Europeans did not understand the cultures of non-Western people then; they do not understand them now.

History, I have often said, is a clock that people use to tell their political time of day. It is also a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography. History tells a people where they are and what they are. Most importantly, history tells a people where they still must go and what they still must be.

There is no way to go directly to the history of African Americans without taking a broader view of African

world history. In his book *Tom-Tom*, the writer, John W. Vandercook makes this meaningful statement:

A race is like a man. Until it uses its own talents, takes pride in its own history, and loves its own memories, it can never fulfill itself completely.

This, in essence, is what African American history and what African American History Month is about. The phrase African American or African American History Month, taken at face value and without serious thought, appears to be incongruous. Why is there a need for an African American History Month when there is no similar month for the other minority groups in the United States? The history of the United States, in total, consists of the collective history of minority groups. What we call 'American civilization' is no more than the sum of their contributions. The African Americans are the least integrated and the most neglected of these groups in the historical interpretation of the American experience. This neglect has made African American History Month a necessity.

Most of the large ethnic groups in the United States have had, and still have, their historical associations. Some of these associations predate the founding of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, (1915). Dr. Charles H. Wesley tells us that, "Historical societies were organized in the United States with the special purpose in view of preserving and maintaining the heritage of the American nation."

Within the frame work of these historical societies many ethnic groups, Black as well as white, engaged in those endeavors that would keep alive their beliefs in themselves and their past as a part of their hopes for the future. For African Americans, Carter G. Woodson led the way and used what was then called, *Negro History Week*, to call attention to his people's contribution to every aspect of world history. Dr. Woodson, then Director of The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, conceived this special week as a time when public attention should be focused on the achievements of America's citizens of African descent.

The acceptance of the facts of African American history and the African American historian as a legitimate part of the academic community did not come easily. Slavery ended and left its false images of Black people intact. In his article, "What the Historian Owes the Negro," the noted African American historian, Dr. Benjamin Quarles, says:

The Founding Fathers revered by historians for over a century and a half, did not conceive of the Negro as part of the body of politics. Theoretically, these men found it hard to imagine a society where Negroes were of equal status to whites. Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States, who was far more liberal than the run of his contemporaries, was never the less certain that "the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government."

I have been referring to the African origin of African American literature and history. This preface is essential to every meaningful discussion of the role of the African American in every aspect of American life, past and present. I want to make it clear that the Black race did not come to the United States culturally empty-handed.

The role and importance of ethnic history is in how well it teaches a people to use their own talents, take pride in their own history and love their own memories. In order to fulfill themselves completely, in all of their honorable endeavors it is important that the teacher of history of the Black race find a definition of the subject, and a frame of reference that can be understood by students who have no prior knowledge of the subject.

The following definition is paraphrased from a speech entitled. "The Negro Writer and His Relation To His Roots," by Saunders Redding, (1960):

Heritage, in essence, is how a people have used their talent to create a history that gives them memories that they can respect, and use to command the respect of other people. The ultimate purpose of history and history teaching is to use a people's talent to develop an awareness and a pride in themselves so that they can create better instruments for living together with other people. This sense of identity is the stimulation for all of a people's honest and creative efforts. A people's relationship to their heritage is the same as the relationship of a child to its mother.

I repeat:

History is a clock that people use to tell their political time of day. It is a compass that they use to find themselves on the map of human geography. It also tells them where they are, and what they are. Most importantly, an understanding of history tells a people where they still must go, and what they still must be.

Early white American historians did not accord African people anywhere a respectful place in their commentaries on the history of man. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, African American historians began to look at their people's history from their vantage point and their point of view. Dr. Benjamin Quarles observed that "as early as 1883 this desire to bring to public attention the untapped material on the Negro prompted George Washington Williams to publish his two-volume *History of the Negro Race in America From 1619 to 1880*."

The first formally trained African American historian was W.E.B. DuBois, whose doctoral dissertation, published in 1895, *The Suppression Of The African Slave Trade To The United States, 1638-1870*, became the first title to be published in the Harvard Historical Studies.

It was with Carter G. Woodson, another Ph.D., that African world history took a great leap forward and found a defender who could document his claims. Woodson was convinced that unless something was done to rescue the Black man from history's oversight, he would become a "negligible factor in the thought of the world;" Woodson, in 1915, founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

Woodson believed that there was no such thing as, "Negro History." He said what was called "Negro History" was only a missing segment of world history. He devoted the greater portion of his life to restoring this segment.

Africa came into the Mediterranean world mainly through Greece, which had been under African influence; and then Africa was cut off from the melting pot by the turmoil among the Europeans and the religious conquests incident to the rise of Islam. Africa, prior to these events, had developed its history and civilization, indigenous to its people and lands. Africa came back into the general picture of history through the penetration of North Africa, West Africa and the Sudan by the Arabs. European and American slave traders next ravaged the continent. The imperialist colonizers and missionaries finally entered the scene and prevailed until the recent re-emergence of independent African nations.

Contrary to a misconception which still prevails, the Africans were familiar with literature and art for many years before their contact with the Western World. Before the breaking-up of the social structure of the West African states of Ghana, Mali and Songhay, and the internal strife and chaos that made the slave trade possible, the forefathers of the Africans who eventually became slaves in the United States lived in a society where university life was fairly common and scholars were held in reverence.

To understand fully any aspect of African American life, one must realize that the African American is not without a cultural past, although he was many generations removed from it before his achievements in American literature and art commanded any appreciable attention.

Africana or Black History should be taught every day, not only in the schools, but also in the home. African History Month should be every month. We need to learn about all the African people of the world, including those who live in Asia and the islands of the Pacific.

In the twenty-first century there will be over one billion African people in the world. We are tomorrow's people. But, of course, we were yesterday's people too. With an understanding of our new importance we can change the world, if first we change ourselves.

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